



The Rôle of Catholic Culture in Uruguay

Author(s): J. Manuel Espinosa

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THE RÔLE OF CATHOLIC CULTURE IN URUGUAY

The spirit of Hispanic America is, first and last, Hispanic and Catholic. By this token the key to a solid understanding of contemporary culture in the Hispanic American nations lies in a true appreciation of the Hispanic and Catholic influences. Yet the study of the Catholic aspect of Hispanic American culture in the national period, isolated by historians from the broad cultural pattern, except in a very narrow sense, is yet to be carried beyond the stage of more or less unqualified generalization. It is hoped that this introduction to the study of Catholic culture in Uruguay will be an incentive to a more exhaustive inquiry into this particular chapter in the general history of Hispanic American cultural development.

I

Uruguay is the smallest of the South American republics. Situated between Brazil and Argentina, Uruguay became an independent buffer state in 1828, and, despite the turbulent character of her early history, the republic emerged with considerable advance in institutions and cultural development.

The nineteenth century witnessed a remarkable growth in population. At the outset of independence the population was only some sixty or seventy thousand. Most of the inhabitants were Spanish, as the warlike Indians had nearly all disappeared, and there were few persons of Negroid ancestry, except along the Brazilian frontier. By 1900 the population had reached the mil-

lion mark, a figure which has since been doubled, due primarily to the large influx of Spanish and Italian immigrants at the turn of the last century. They have been welded into a patriotic, proud Uruguayan nationality. The center of the country is the capital city of Montevideo, with nearly a third of the total population and the only city in Uruguay of any great size. The rest of the republic is mainly rural, but *latifundia* are practically non-existent. The Roman Catholic religion is professed by the majority of the inhabitants. The 1908 census listed 430,095 as Catholics, 126,425 as Liberals, and 12,232 as Protestants. Uruguay boasts of less illiteracy than any other of the republics below the United States. All things considered, today Uruguay takes a prominent place among the advanced nations of the world.

II

Uruguay is not only the smallest, but also the youngest of the Hispanic American nations, and for this reason her cultural history covers the shortest period of time. In fact the occupation of this region by Europeans is a part of the last chapter in the history of Spanish conquest and colonization in the New World. When all the principal cities of Hispanic America, from Mexico to Bogotá in the north to Santiago and Córdoba in the south, had two centuries of colonial culture behind them, Uruguay was still a vast open country where wild cattle grazed without a master. Several Franciscan Indian missions, where over a thousand natives were gathered and taught the Christian religion and the rudiments of farming and civilized life, and for a time seven magnificent and much larger Jesuit missions, a part of the famous Paraguay Reductions, constituted virtually the sum total of culture on Uruguayan soil. This was the situation at the close of the seventeenth century.

Frontier conditions prevailed throughout the eighteenth century. In 1726, while in the solemn halls of the universities of Mexico, Bogotá, and Quito, scholastic philosophy, jurisprudence, and rhetoric were being taught, and while in sumptuous Lima the viceroy, in his baroque palace, was holding his famous academic gatherings with numerous very learned men in attendance, the

first settlers of Montevideo were setting up their humble homes and plowing virgin soil with the labor of their own hands, and knew no other reading matter than their prayer books. At the close of the eighteenth century, while most of the other colonial cities, from Anahuac to Potosí, had churches, convents, and universities, and famous scholars and men of letters, Uruguay could boast only of her little Franciscan college.

Uruguay presented very humble manifestations of culture at the close of the colonial period and on the eve of the Wars of Independence. It may be said that she did not have time to develop sufficiently in the colonial period to attain any really solid culture, as was the case in the Hispanic American nations of earlier European origin. The Wars of Independence came at the time when Uruguayan society was just beginning to show evidence of a broader cultural development.

But the time element was not the only factor responsible for the late appearance of civilization in Uruguay. For the viceregal capitals of Mexico and Perú were not a century old when they could already boast of a culture which placed them virtually on a par with the great centers of Europe. But they were born under different conditions. Their growth coincided with the period of Spain's greatest cultural flowering, and her greatest period of overseas colonization. By the end of the seventeenth century, which was the eve of Uruguayan beginnings, the great tide of Spanish immigration to America was dying down. Besides, Uruguay offered no fabulous treasure, no gold or silver mines, no tropical products, nor a large servile race, but only vast rolling plains; and on the bare horizon and in the forests one had to face the arrows of hostile Indians.

A French traveller, who visited Montevideo in the middle of the eighteenth century, writes that the house of the Governor had the ground for a floor, and so little furniture that it looked more like the house of a peasant. If this was the character of the principal household, one may imagine how the others were. This austere simplicity persisted until the end of the colonial period. The people got up at dawn and went to bed with the ringing of bells at sundown. The bells of the Iglesia Matriz regulated the

life of the inhabitants, who were devout Catholics, faithful to the precepts of the Church. From its founding, in 1726, Montevideo was a frontier parish of the diocese of Buenos Aires.

The small military outpost might have remained isolated and insignificant even longer if a new and unforeseen source of wealth had not been found—the industry which grew from a few horses and cattle which had been left by early Spanish explorers, and which had multiplied prodigiously on the grassy plains. This led to a second movement of Spanish population into Uruguay in the last half of the eighteenth century. Rapid development followed.

From the cultural viewpoint, it is important to keep in mind that this awakening of the Uruguayan settlements to their first extensive independent development coincided with the growing influence of the French encyclopedists upon Spanish culture. In other words, Uruguay was not born under the direct influences of the early Spanish-Catholic colonial tradition. Rather, her first real cultural beginnings date from the eighteenth century, when Spain, under the Bourbon dynasty and the politics of Frenchified ministers, was bowing to French influences alien to her traditional Catholic character. Although Uruguay was Catholic in spirit and tradition from the beginning, this was the intellectual atmosphere in which Uruguayan society was born.

An Englishman who visited Montevideo in 1807, told, on his return to London: "On my arrival there one of the objects of my investigation was to find a book shop, and upon seeing over the door of a private home a sign stating that books and paper were sold there, I entered. I asked for various Spanish works such as the *Quijote* and *Padre Feijóo*, but they were not to be found, nor were they known. The most notable works which I discovered were one in Latin . . . an old book in English . . . a French treatise on the anatomical structure of the human body, and three great folios on theology in Spanish, besides a list of books prohibited by the Inquisition . . ." "This," said the Englishman, "may give an idea of the literature of the region."

The Englishman refers to the public sale of books. To that extent his observations are valid. But it must not be inferred that

the books the Englishman saw were the only ones known to anyone in Montevideo. As a matter of fact, at the very period referred to in this account, there were besides the small library of the Franciscan Convent of San Bernardino—which, incidentally, was not used exclusively by the friars—various modest private libraries. Among some of the early men of letters of the city in the period after 1800, Fathers Pérez Castellanos and Larrañaga had in their homes numerous works on philosophy, science, and literature. Naturally the public sale of books was at that time negligible, because the great majority of the people were illiterate.

However, the only important center of culture in the city during the colonial period was the Franciscan convent. The Franciscans have been justly called the pioneers of Uruguayan civilization. They were responsible for the little primary and secondary education in the country from the founding of Montevideo to the establishment of national independence. In 1745 the Jesuits established themselves in the city, and opened the first primary school; but after their expulsion in 1767, the town council turned the school over to the Franciscans, who were in charge until the end of the colonial period. It is also of importance to note here that in 1795 was founded the first free school in Montevideo, a school for girls under the direction of the Dominican sisters, who were the first women teachers in Uruguay. The success of the enterprise led to the establishment of similar schools for boys. By the seventeen eighties, the city had greater aspirations, and advanced courses in philosophy and theology were inaugurated, but they were short-lived. Ambitious Uruguayan students still had to go elsewhere for their higher education.

III

The first fifteen years of the nineteenth century were the golden age of Uruguay's colonial period. It was the era of the first creole generation of men of letters, who began their training under the Franciscans in Montevideo, and finished their studies in Buenos Aires, Córdoba, or Charcas. It was a generation composed mostly of priests: Pérez Castellanos, Dámaso Larrañaga, Juan P. Martínez, Fray Benito Lamas, Monterroso, and others.

Father Castellanos, the first native Uruguayan priest, and a famous naturalist, came to possess one of the best private libraries of his time, and the best in Uruguay, which he donated to the government. The government made it the nucleus of the first public library in Montevideo—later the National Library.

Father Larrañaga was a naturalist of world-wide fame. As librarian, and in the field of primary and secondary education, he was an important figure in the development of Uruguayan culture. He founded the influential Lancastrian School opened in 1821; and the first proposal for the establishment of a national university was read by him, in the capacity of senator, in the National Assembly of 1832, a proposal which resulted in the *Casa de Estudios*, later to become the National University.

Fray Benito Lamas was also important in promoting education and culture in Uruguay. In 1815 he took charge of the only primary school in existence at the time, which was called the *Escuela de la Patria*, and which is of special interest because it was the first school in which were taught civic doctrines in defense of national independence. He was also director of the first secondary school established after independence.

In other phases of Uruguay's cultural history the Catholic Church played a prominent rôle. Shortly after the first printing press was set up in 1810, appeared the *Gaceta*, Uruguay's first newspaper, published by the Franciscan Fray Cirilo Alameda. From this same press was published in 1816 the "Oration Inaugurating the Public Library of Montevideo," by Father Larrañaga, a sixteen-page booklet which was the first literary publication by a native author to appear in Uruguay. "La lealtad más acendrada," by Father Martínez, written and produced in 1808, was the first theatrical production and also the first literary work by a native author produced in the country. The second theatrical production, "Sentimientos de un patriota," was the work of Bartolomé Hidalgo, who had received all of his education from the Franciscans of San Bernardino. Hidalgo is also important because he was the first one to give lasting literary form to the folk literature of Uruguay.

IV

During the struggle for independence this first flowering of culture was temporarily checked, and war took the center of the stage. As the intellectual leaders of the period the clergy played a prominent rôle in this struggle. They were among the popularly elected members of the *cabildo abierto*. This body, upon news of the abdication of the Spanish king, created an independent *Junta* in Uruguay, on the model of the Seville *Junta*, which had been set up in Spain in defiance of Napoleon's rule. The Seville *Junta* was recognized as representing the sovereign power of the Spanish king until he might be restored to power. On May 13, 1810, the news reached Montevideo that the Seville *Junta* had fallen. At Buenos Aires, the capital of the viceroyalty of La Plata, of which Uruguay was a part, there was immediately demand for a *cabildo abierto*. The bishop of Buenos Aires and twenty-six members of the clergy attended the meeting. Of these, eighteen voted to depose the viceroy, and eleven specified with clarity the principal that in the default of the civil authority the latter automatically reverted to the people, who were its original source.

As the historian Bauzá writes: "Uruguayan society was indebted to them [the clergy] for all of her culture: for it was not from the rude *conquistador*, but rather from the missionary, his companion, and later, the parish priest, that she received primary education, the love for the arts, and the first scientific notions, all of which stimulated her development. . . . Through their close relationship, the people and the clergy were one in their aspirations: and on the occasion of the great revolutionary uprising, both fought together in a common struggle."

This was clearly shown on the occasion of the expulsion of the Franciscans from Uruguay along with forty Creole families, among them that of Artigas, the father of Uruguayan independence, because of their sympathy with the revolutionary movement: in the Franciscan convent Fathers Lamas and Monterroso had been preaching independence. This expulsion was a determining factor in arousing the patriotic people of Uruguay to unite against all foreign domination. The Spanish authorities bewailed the fact that nearly all the Uruguayan clergy had joined the move-

ment for independence. They insisted that the passing of Spanish domination would mean the downfall of the Catholic Church. Despite their protests, Spanish domination was to pass, but the Catholic Church was to remain.

In every phase of the struggle for independence—as soldiers, political advisors, chaplains, and as contributors to the war chest—the clergy were in the forefront. Artigas gave them high praise. Father Larrañaga, the author of the famous “Instructions of the Year '13,” vigorously defended democratic constitutional principles. And it was a priest, serving as secretary to Artigas, who explained to the *caudillo* the democratic doctrines of the United States' Constitution, which became the basis of much of his political philosophy.

When the Uruguayan people finally formed an independent republic, the Catholic Church continued to be the most important single influence in both the public and private affairs of the nation. Uruguay's first constitution, in effect from 1830 to 1919, made the Roman Catholic religion the State religion.

V

As was the case everywhere in Spanish America after the outbreak of the Wars of Independence, the readjustment of relations between church and state in Uruguay presented the Vatican with a formidable problem. For three long centuries, the Spanish monarchs, by right of the *real patronato*, exercised sovereignty in practically all ecclesiastical matters in America, thereby eliminating the direct authority of the Holy See. Under these conditions it was virtually impossible for the Vatican to place itself in contact with the new American republics as they took shape without becoming involved in each case in a diplomatic conflict with the Spanish ambassador at Rome. Nevertheless, during the pontificate of Pius VII the policy was adopted of dealing directly with the new governments as they were established, despite Spanish protests.

In 1826 Father Larrañaga was named by papal authority as vicar general of the “Banda Oriental.” When the Republic of Uruguay was established under the constitution of 1830, the leaders were all sincere Catholics, and until the death of Father Larrañaga

in 1848 there was no occasion for any conflict between church and state. In appointing the successor to Father Larrañaga, however, the Uruguayan government assumed the *patronato* power. The Holy See refused to recognize this power, yet much unilateral legislation on the part of the civil authorities was tolerated *pro bono pacis*. And so the germ of conflict was ever present.

In the fifties serious problems presented themselves, and in 1861 an open conflict arose. Jacinto Vera, the vicar apostolic, refused to comply with the demands of the civil authorities, who were attempting to dominate the Church, and he was sent into exile. But he continued to govern the vicariate from Buenos Aires. Finally he returned to Uruguay and, amid all the honors of a conqueror, continued in his post without giving the government any explanation for his acts. From that date forward, August 23, 1863, the Church was to enjoy a position of independence and dignity. Vera, the outstanding apostle of the Church in Uruguay since independence, had destroyed decisively the position of extreme regalism, based on the *patronato* power, which the Uruguayan government had attempted to maintain.

However, a tradition of hostility toward the Church continued to exist in influential political circles, a tendency which reached its peak during the administrations of José Batlle y Ordóñez, who was looked upon by the Church as its most bitter enemy.

The separation of church and state as established by the constitution of 1919 was a landmark in the history of the Catholic Church in Uruguay. It brought to an end the impossible situation resulting from the rise of anti-clerical liberalism in government circles and the consequent lack of harmony between Church and State. Today the legal status of the Catholic Church and its members is little different from the situation in the United States. Complete religious toleration is guaranteed by the constitution. The Catholic Church holds title to its property, which is free from taxation, it is recognized in law as a juridical personality, and there are no restrictions on its power to receive outright bequests. Public education has been entirely secularized, but private schools of all grades are permitted, and consequently the Catholic Church continues to maintain its extensive and growing educational system.

VI

During the first half of the nineteenth century, in an atmosphere of constant civil war, although the Catholics showed no unusual vitality, the Catholic Church continued to be the most important civilizing force in Uruguay. During the *Guerra Grande* the Jesuits founded a school in Montevideo and, after the conclusion of the war, a college and seminary at Santa Lucia, where Father Yeregui, later to become the second bishop of Montevideo, was educated. Meanwhile, one of the great ambitions of the Catholic people was the establishment of a bishopric. As early as 1808 the *cabildo* of Montevideo made a request to that effect. The petition was repeated in 1825, and again in 1861. In 1864 Jacinto Vera was made Titular Bishop of Megara, and in 1878 Father Yeregui's special mission to the Vatican resulted in Vera's appointment as the first bishop of Montevideo.

The great development of the Catholic Church in Uruguay dates from the time of Bishop Vera. The *Seminario Conciliar* was established, and Uruguay for the first time developed a native-born clergy. Bishop Vera's unusual missionary zeal led to the creation of a veritable school of missionary bishops, transforming the Catholic spirit in Uruguay into a vitally active and apostolic force. When Vera became bishop there were only three religious communities and very few religious; but during his time the number was multiplied, and numerous new schools, colleges, hospitals, and charitable institutions were established.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, Catholic laymen made many important contributions to the nation's culture. Among the most conspicuous may be mentioned Dr. Joaquín Requena, the renowned legal authority and codifier of laws; Don Francisco Bauzá, Uruguay's famous historian, author of the *Historia de la dominación española en el Uruguay* (a two volume work indispensable to students of Uruguayan colonial history), and the most celebrated parliamentary orator of his generation; and Dr. Juan Zorrilla de San Martín, the finest poet Uruguay has produced, author of the nation's great epics *Tabaré*, *La Leyenda Patria*, and *La Epopeya de Artigas*. Among the clergy, Dr. Mariano Soler

attained national recognition as an apologist, and also as an archeologist, in which field he published several important works.

This period saw also the founding of *El Bien Público*, a Catholic daily which many competent critics describe as the outstanding Catholic newspaper in South America today. The Catholic Club, an important Catholic center, was also founded during this period, as well as the influential *Círculo de Obreros Católicos* (Catholic Workers' Organization), which has branches throughout the entire Republic.

VII

A cursory glance at the intellectual history of Uruguay will reveal some of the principal problems which the Catholic Church has faced during the past century. In a general way they were not unlike those that were to appear in Spain and in the rest of Hispanic America. As I have already pointed out, in the eighteenth century Bourbon Spain fell under the influence of ideas which were alien to her traditional Catholic character. In the nineteenth century this trend continued and took on new ramifications.

Prior to the thirties the Catholic clergy had dominated the intellectual life of Uruguay. The generation of the thirties and forties, formed in the *Casa de Estudios*, although still Catholic in spirit, was definitely tinged with the new liberal social and economic doctrines which were a part of its romantic idealism. By the fourth decade of the nineteenth century, Uruguayan intellectuals were turning directly to France for inspiration, relegating Spanish intellectual influences more and more to the background as the century progressed. In literature the Catholic poet Acuña de Figueroa kept the Catholic spirit alive, but he seemed to represent an age that was passing. In the forties a more cosmopolitan note was added when, due to political turbulence in Argentina, a number of Argentinian intellectuals took refuge in Montevideo. Until the seventies a form of romantic liberalism—yet with a Catholic tinge—was the dominant intellectual trend. But as the century progressed, more and more apostate Catholics came to fill the ranks of Uruguay's intellectuals.

The next generation, that of the nineties, developed under the spell of positivism and modernism. Varying degrees of anti-clericalism and free-thinking, ranging from Rodó to Batlle y Ordóñez, are represented. Intellectually it was a period of decadence. While in Spain at this time the great Catholic scholar Menéndez y Pelayo was calling for a return to traditional values, Uruguay also had men of letters among the defenders of the Catholic tradition: Zorrilla y San Martín, Bauzá, and Bishop Soler.

During the past two decades, Uruguay's liberal intellectuals seem somewhat disillusioned and less militant. They now bewail the superficial character of Uruguay's secularized agencies of culture. Among other things they point out that the State University is no longer a true cultural force, but rather a mere agency of utilitarianism, having adapted itself solely to the socio-economic needs of the present day, and lacking in the cultural elements necessary to develop a flourishing of the sciences and the humanities. In this less hostile atmosphere the Church has grown stronger both as an institution and in its cultural influence.

VIII

The gradual disappearance of the exaggerated cleavage between church and state, and also the recent reaction against the ultra-liberal tendencies of the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, are perhaps evidences not only of the intelligence and character of Catholic leadership in Uruguay, but also of the underlying incompatibility of such developments with Uruguay's basic cultural pattern. This may be best illustrated by the successes and failures of the arch-liberal Batlle y Ordóñez, under whose leadership in the first two decades of the twentieth century the most exaggerated form of anti-clerical and atheistic liberalism was at its height.

Batlle and his followers were for the most part apostate Catholics; in fact, Batlle had been one of the founders of the Catholic Club of Montevideo. But now, from the rostrum and from his newspaper, *El Día*, Batlle attacked the Catholic Church bitterly, and attempted to build up by drastic legislation an anti-clerical and godless spirit in the land. The fact, however, remains that whereas much of his political, economic, and social legislation has been of fundamental importance in the material progress of the

nation, nevertheless, his exaggerated program with regard to the Church has not been successful.

In 1905, when Batlle ordered the removal of the crucifixes from the rooms of all state-controlled hospitals, it aroused the ire of Uruguay's semi-idealistic Liberal, José Enrique Rodó, who wrote a number of articles in protest, later published under the title *Liberalism and Jacobinism*. Although a free thinker, Rodó believed that the Crucifix, as a symbol of Christian charity, had a place in the hospitals of the nation. And later, when Batlle proposed the abolition of all Catholic schools, many prominent Liberals defended the Catholic position, and the proposal was defeated. The reaction to the Batllista program led among other things to the founding of the Civic Union Party, a non-clerical Catholic political party. Over a quarter of a century it has played an important rôle in national politics. One of the most important sections of Uruguay's constitution, the section entitled "Rights, Duties, and Guarantees," is the work of Dr. Joaquin Seco Illa, the recent leader of the Civic Union Party.

Three outstanding members of this Catholic Party have recently been appointed to important posts in Europe: Professor Lacalle at Geneva, Dr. Regules at the Hague, and Dr. Seco Illa at the Vatican. Official diplomatic relations with the Holy See had been broken off during the administration of President Batlle. Don Alfredo Baldomir, now president of the Republic, promised in his pre-election campaign that he would reestablish relations with the Holy See, and within a year after his election he fulfilled his promise.

IX

In recent years there has been a general normalization of Catholic relations in public life. A number of nation-wide manifestations of Catholic Action, such as the establishment of federations of Catholic youth on a remarkably large scale, and such public acts of faith as the annual Corpus Christi procession in Montevideo, attended by over 150,000 of the faithful, and the attendance of over 500,000 Catholics at the Third National Eucharistic Congress in Montevideo in 1938 are, in their way, evidences of the vitality of Catholic culture.

In 1896 the diocese of Montevideo was elevated to the status of an archdiocese, and the suffragan dioceses of Salto and Melo were established. Today, in the three dioceses of the Republic, there are 450 clergy (150 secular and 300 regular); ninety-five parishes; 148 religious communities (sixty-one of men and eighty-seven of women); three seminaries (including the Seminario Mayor Interdiocesano y Menor Metropolitano in Montevideo, under the direction of the Jesuits); and eighty-eight Catholic schools and colleges. Twelve of the Catholic colleges are corporate colleges of the State University.

Despite the secularization of public education, of the cemeteries, and of public life in general, the Catholic spirit has continued to grow with a methodical tenacity, the significance of which is not fully appreciated by most foreign observers. The Catholic Church, which represents well over half the total population, is a vital cultural force in Uruguay today.

J. MANUEL ESPINOSA.

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* Father Sallaberry, rector of the Seminario Mayor Interdiocesano y Menor Metropolitano de Cristo Rey, Montevideo, is one of Uruguay's leading Church historians.